

Jeremiah's 70 Year Chronology

This is the fourth in a series of five essays on Jeremiah's prophecy of Israel's seventy-year servitude in Babylon. This essay discusses the validity of the chronology of the foretold duration of the servitude.

Some skeptics have objected that it is not chronologically possible to establish a seventy-year exile for the Judeans who were taken into captivity during the reign of Nebuchadnezzar. They assert that the Jews were first taken into captivity in 587 B.C. and that Cyrus' decree to let them return to their homeland was issued in 539 B.C., so that spans less than sixty years. But this mistakes vassalage for captivity. Jeremiah's text says "these nations shall serve the king of Babylon seventy years." While it is customary to refer to this period as a captivity or an exile, because much of it includes the time in which the Jews were in exile as captives, yet the text says "serve" not "be captives" or "go into exile." Technically, the text refers to vassalage, not captivity. Judah and the surrounding nations became vassals of Nebuchadnezzar in 605 B.C.

The Eerdmans Bible Dictionary states the following regarding the reign of King Jehoiakim: "After the battle of Carchemish (605), in which Nebuchadnezzar defeated Neco, Jehoiakim became a Babylonian vassal (Jer 46:2)"¹ That was the year Nebuchadnezzar first besieged Jerusalem, confiscated some of the Temple treasures, and deported a number of young royal hostages to Babylon.² That was the year in which Jeremiah proclaimed the prophecy under discussion--the year the servitude of Judah began.

The skeptics object to the year 536 B.C. as the date of the Jews' return from the Babylonian captivity. They do so on the grounds that Cyrus conquered Babylon in 539 B.C. and that the Jews must have returned by at least 538. However, this overlooks the cultural practice among the Babylonians and Persians for dating regnal years of their kings. Among these ancient near eastern people, the regnal year of a king was counted from the New Year's day following the king's ascension to the throne. This is different than the practice of western cultures by which skeptics erroneously judge the present situation.

Jack Finegan, a recognized authority on ancient chronology and one who has no fundamentalist axe to grind, stated:

The system of reckoning which prevailed in Babylon, Assyria, and Persia, may be called the accession-year system. . . . In the accession-year system the portion of a year from the accession of the king to the end of the then current calendar year is only his 'accession year' (and for chronological purposes remains a part of the last numbered regnal year of his predecessor), and the new king's Year 1 begins only on the first day of the new calendar year after his accession.³

¹ Eerdmans Study Bible, "Jehoiakim," p. 559; see also Josephus, *Ant.* X.v.2.

² Dan. 1:1-4; Josephus, *Ant.* X.x.1.

³ Jack Finegan, *Handbook of Biblical Chronology* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1964), pp. 85-86.

Among the Jews the practice was not consistent. Sometimes they followed the accession-year system and sometimes the non-accession system. Likewise, they sometimes followed the calendar year that began with the month of Nisan, and sometimes the calendar that began with the month Tishri.⁴ In part, the method used by Jewish historians depended on the system used by the nation which held political dominance over them at the time. It is very likely that Ezra, a prominent citizen of Persia, and under orders from the Persian king, used the accession-year system of the Persians.

Cyrus conquered Babylon on October 16, 539 B.C., and thus became the sovereign of the Medo-Persian Empire. However, the following New Year's day was not until March 24, 538. So his first regnal year extended from March 24, 538, to March 23, 537 B.C. Sometime within that year, Cyrus issued the decree for the captive nations to return home (2 Chron. 36:22). It is likely that the decree was issued late in the year, say in January or February of 537, because administrative duties would have been heavy for the months immediately following the conquest of Babylon; less important details, like the affairs of foreign captives, would naturally be postponed. Taking into account the slow pace at which government business took place, the amount of time required to summons, assemble, and organize a large company of returnees, and the time for such a large group to travel the long distance from Babylon to Jerusalem, it is reasonable to expect that the convoy did not arrive in Judah until some time in 536.

As a secondary remark, the alleged difficulty that skeptics see here is evidence to support the validity of the date Jeremiah attached to this prophecy. If the date had been supplied by some late redactor, as the skeptics hypothesize, the redactor surely would have selected a date that would have been free from difficulties. He would have selected a date that fulfilled the seventy years without possible question. As it stands, the date bears all the marks of authenticity.

Lack of Precision

Some skeptics object that the explanation of the 70 years of servitude was not established with rigorous precision. Reasonable common sense expects that an ancient text should be interpreted according to how it would have been understood by the people to whom it was addressed, not according to 20th century scientific precision. From extant contemporary literature of that period, I provided two examples of how the ancient Jews understood the 70 years of Jeremiah's prophecy. In both cases, the Jews regarded the elapsed time to be consistent with their understanding of 70 years. In insisting on 20th century scientific precision, the skeptic is not reasonable.

Round Number

Some skeptics may object to my interpretation of the "seventy years" as a round number. According to them, the time of Israel's subjugation to the Babylonian kings has to be exactly seventy years for the prophecy to be fulfilled. In this they disagree with competent critical scholars like John Bright who said: "This seems to be here no more than a round number (i.e., a normal life span)."⁵ Also they disagree with *The Interpreter's Bible*, which declared: "Seventy years constitute

⁴ Finegan, pp. 87-92.

⁵ Bright, p. 160.

the period during which the Jews were to serve Babylon, at the end of which Babylon itself was to be punished. . . . The number was not to be taken literally, but rather as a round or ‘perfect’ number, perhaps the length of a man's lifetime (Ps. 90:10)."⁶ This understanding is supported by extra-Biblical texts.⁷ For skeptics to demand mathematical precision in statements of this type is to go beyond the normal principles of interpretation used by critical scholarship and common sense reasoning.

Also, skeptics may object that the return journey of the captives would not be as long as I indicated. However, we have Ezra's record of how long it took his relatively small company to travel to Jerusalem--four months (Ezra 7:9). It surely would take quite a bit longer than four months for approximately 49,000 captives to travel that distance. Indeed, the available evidence supports my estimation of the time involved.

Now, let's put the skeptic's claim to the test. If a post-exilic editor wanted to alter the text to make it look like a fulfilled prophecy, why would he not put in the exact number of actual years instead of a round number? After all, an exact number would be much more impressive, much more convincing. Or, on the other hand, why wouldn't the fraudulent editor adjust the date of the prophecy to make the seventy-year interval fit with no apparent ambiguity. Unfortunately for skeptics, no existing Hebrew manuscripts contain an alternate number or an alternate date. The same is true for all the ancient translations of Jeremiah. Thus, no objective evidence exists to support the claim of a fraudulent alteration of the text. All objective textual evidence supports the date and the reading "seventy years."

All the Details

A skeptic may insist that "all the details" of the prophecy must be verified fulfilled. By this he must mean that all the minor details must be verified with valid objective evidence, not just the principal significant details. However, in the absence of contrary evidence, common sense and reasonableness demand that if the essential details of a reported historical event are verified as true, then the minor unverified details can be regarded as true also. No canon of historical research denies this. This is true of prophecy also: in the absence of contrary evidence, if the essential details of a prophecy are verified as fulfilled, then the unverified details may be regarded as fulfilled also. What law of evidence would deny this?

Some skeptics assert that “extraordinary claims require extraordinary proof.” The next essay discusses the validity of the proof offered in defense of the validity of Jeremiah's prophecy.

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⁶ *The Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 5, p. 1000.

⁷ J. A. Thompson, *The Book of Jeremiah*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament, R. K. Harrison, Gen. ed. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1980), p. 513.